

South Norfolk Council

Annual Governance Statement

2023/24

1. Scope of Responsibility

South Norfolk Council is responsible for ensuring that its business is conducted in accordance with the law and proper standards. It must ensure that public money is safeguarded and properly accounted for, and used economically, efficiently and effectively. South Norfolk Council also has a duty under the Local Government Act 1999 to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way in which its functions are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness.

In discharging this overall responsibility, South Norfolk Council is responsible for putting in place proper arrangements for the governance of its affairs, facilitating the effective exercise of its functions, and making proper arrangements for the management of risk.

As part of its Constitution, South Norfolk Council has approved and adopted a code of corporate governance, which is consistent with the principles of the CIPFA/SOLACE Framework “Delivering Good Governance in Local Government”. In May 2024, the Council adopted a revised Code of Corporate Governance which has been updated to reflect the latest best practice guidance. This Annual Governance Statement is reflective of the Code which was in place at the time of writing. The Statement for 2024/25 will then reflect the new Code the Council has adopted.

A copy of the Code is available on our website, within the Constitution, and can be downloaded [here](#).

This statement explains how South Norfolk Council has complied with the code and also meets the requirements of regulation 6 (1) of the Accounts and Audit (England) Regulations 2015 in relation to the publication of a statement on internal control, and accompanies the 2023/24 Statement of Accounts of the Council. The Annual Governance Statement is subject to detailed review and approval by the Finance, Resources, Audit and Governance Committee.

2. The Purpose of the Governance Framework

The governance framework comprises the systems and processes for the direction and control of the authority and its activities through which it accounts to, engages with and leads the community. It enables the authority to monitor the achievement of its strategic objectives and to consider whether those objectives have led to the delivery of appropriate, cost-effective services.

The system of internal control is a significant part of that framework and is designed to manage risk to a reasonable level. It cannot eliminate all risk of failure to achieve policies, aims and objectives and can therefore only provide reasonable and not absolute assurance of effectiveness. The system of internal control is based on an ongoing process designed to identify and prioritise the risks to the achievement of South Norfolk Council’s policies, aims and objectives, to evaluate the likelihood of those risks being realised and the impact should they be realised, and to manage them efficiently, effectively and economically.

The governance framework has been in place at South Norfolk Council for the year ended 31 March 2024 and up to the date of approval of the statement of accounts.

3. The Governance Framework

An annual review of the Governance Framework at South Norfolk Council was completed prior to the preparation of the Annual Governance Statement, with key officers completing full assurance statements for their area of responsibility, and these being signed off by the relevant member of the Corporate Leadership Team (CLT). These are in place to ensure the governance arrangements across the Council are adequate, and to also recognise where any further work needs to be done.

The code of corporate governance was in place for the 2023/24 financial year. This Code is the framework of policies, procedures, behaviours and values which determine how the Council will achieve its priorities and is based upon the seven principles of the International Framework for Corporate Governance in the Public Sector.

The Council's Vision and Priorities:

For the year 2023/24, South Norfolk Council's vision and priorities were set out in the Strategic Plan 2020-2024:

THE VISION: Working together to create the best place and environment for everyone, now and for future generations

OUR PRIORITIES, OUR PEOPLE, OUR APPROACH:

1. Growing the economy;
2. Supporting individuals and empowering communities;
3. Protecting and improving the natural and built environment, whilst maximising quality of life; and
4. Moving with the times, working smartly and collaboratively.

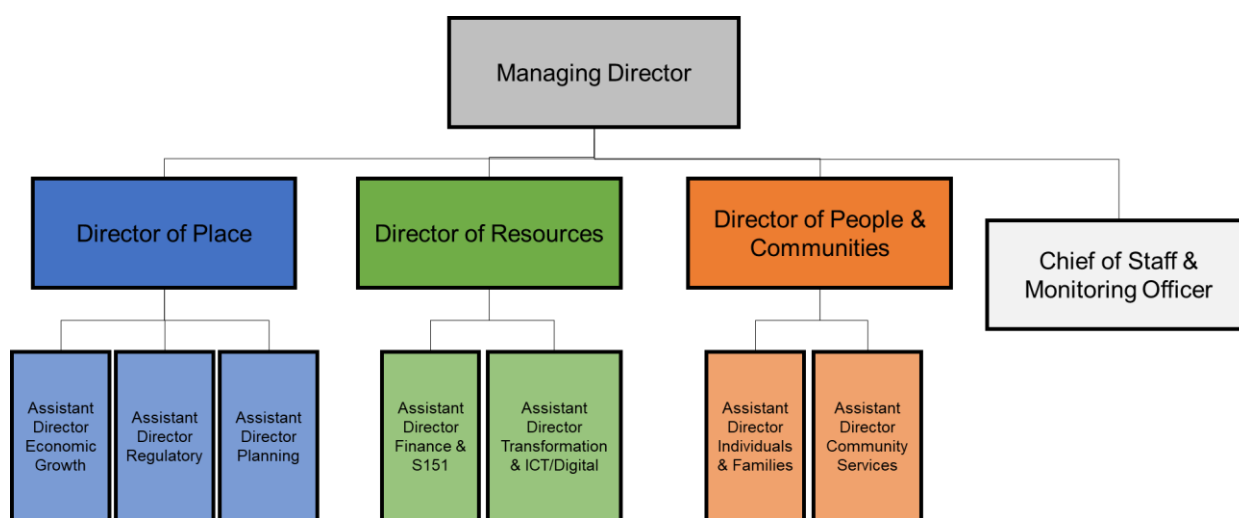
The vision and priorities are communicated through the Strategic Plan, plus regular briefings, press releases, website and the Link magazine, which is delivered 2 times a year to every household and business in the District.

To underpin the Strategic Plan, a detailed Delivery Plan is produced. This describes our intended activities for the 12 months from April to March each year to support the priorities set out in the Strategic Plan. This plan is produced as an integrated process with the Council's annual budget setting and Medium-Term Financial Plan revision. The 2022-2024 Plan can be accessed [here](#).

From 1 April 2024, the Council has adopted a new Strategic Plan covering the period 2024-2028 and a Delivery Plan covering 2024-2026.

Review of the Council's Governance Arrangements:

The Council regularly reviews its organisational structure as part of aligning resources with demand to deliver the priorities above. The Council's collaboration with Broadland District Council established one officer team across the two Councils, which includes a Corporate Leadership Team (CLT), consisting of the Managing Director, three Directors, the Monitoring Officer (Chief of Staff) and the Section 151 Officer (Assistant Director Finance). CLT is also supported by a further six Assistant Directors, as follows:



Measuring the Quality of Services for Users and ensuring they are delivered in accordance with the Council's objectives and best use of resources:

The 4-year Strategic Plan sets out our Priorities together with targets for success over this time. The 2022-2024 Delivery Plan set out the 'Delivery Measures' which aim to track the performance of our services and how well we are achieving our key ambitions. The Delivery Measures are tracked and reported in quarters 2, 3 and 4 to Cabinet as part of the Performance Framework.

The Delivery Plan set out the proposed activities and 'business as usual' operational services that would be undertaken for the financial year 2023/24. Between February and April 2023, staff personal objectives are set for the year and reflect the proposed activities they will be working on from the Delivery Plan. These personal objectives are reviewed regularly during the year and are normally assessed as part of annual staff performance reviews in March/April each year.

Defining and Documenting Roles and Responsibilities of Councillors and Officers and how decisions are taken:

The Council's constitution, scheme of delegation, Local Member Protocol, protocol on Member / officer relations, contract procedure rules, rules of financial governance and rule of procedure set the framework in which the organisation makes decisions.

Codes of Conduct Defining Standards of Behaviour for Councillors and Officers:

The Council operates Codes of Conduct for Councillors and Officers, with clear processes embedded to respond to any concerns raised regarding the standards of behaviour. The Council reviewed its Councillors Code of Conduct during 2022/23, which resulted in Full Council adopting a new Code of Conduct based on the Local Government Association Model Code in May 2023, which provides a more robust framework for standards amongst members. In 2023/24, a review of processes in relation to Code of Conduct complaints and new guidance was issued on our website to support individuals submitting complaints.

The Council conforms to the governance requirements of the CIPFA Statement on the Role of the Chief Financial Officer in Local Government (2016)

The Rules of Financial Governance explain the statutory duties of the Section 151 Officer including the responsibility under direction of the Cabinet for the proper administration of the Council's financial affairs. The Council's governance arrangements allow the Section 151 Officer to bring influence to bear on all material business decisions. The Section 151 Officer supports the CLT and has the authority to bring matters directly to the attention of the Managing Director if required. Regular specific meetings are also held to discuss matters relating to the Section 151 role.

CIPFA Financial Management Code

The Council has assessed itself against the CIPFA Financial Management code and has concluded that it complies with the key requirements therein, alongside this conclusion an action plan has been developed to make further improvements.

The Finance, Resources, Audit and Governance Committee

The Committee met regularly during the year. Its key tasks are to monitor the work of Internal and External Audit, support risk management, to approve the statutory accounts, and to oversee the internal and external audit work in supporting the production of this Annual Governance Statement.

Ensuring Compliance with Laws and Regulations, Internal Policies and Procedures:

Responsibilities for statutory obligations are formally established. The Head of Paid Service disseminates statutory instruments to Managers responsible for acting on them. The relevant professional officers are tasked with ensuring compliance with appropriate policies and procedures to ensure all Officers work within them.

Decisions to be taken by Councillors as part of the Council's Committee processes are subject to a rigorous scrutiny process by the Monitoring Officer, Section 151 Officer and in most cases CLT before they are considered by Cabinet or Full Council.

Assistant Directors have completed an Assurance Statement covering key governance aspects with their area of responsibility. The outcomes of these Assurance Statements are described under *Managers' Assurance within Governance Issues*.

Whistle-blowing Policy and Investigating Complaints:

As employees, councillors and others who deal with the Council are often the first to spot things that may be wrong or inappropriate at the Council, a Whistle-blowing Policy is in place to provide help and assistance with such matters. There is also a formal complaints procedure in place.

Tackling Fraud and Corruption:

The Council has a Counter Fraud, Corruption and Bribery Strategy in place to ensure that we can deliver against our priorities whilst minimising losses to fraud, corruption, and bribery.

An Annual Fraud Return is provided to the External Auditor which summarises the Head of Internal Audit's views on risk of fraud at the Authority. In addition, the Monitoring Officer, the Section 151 Officer and the Chair of the Finance, Resources, Audit and Governance Committee also complete such statements on an annual basis.

During 2022/23, Internal Audit carried out a review of the Council's fraud and corruption arrangements against the latest best practice guidance. The recommendations from this audit were followed up during 2023/24 for progress with implementation and three remain in progress. An audit is planned again in 2024/25.

Development Needs of Members and Officers:

Members

There is a 4-year training programme in place for Members aimed at supporting Councillors in their role and ensuring Councillors can take on all aspects of their role confidently and legally. Training is provided through a mixture of service delivery, via internal staff, experts in the field and external trainers such as East of England Local Government Association, Richard Wills Training Associates, Link Support Services and the Centre for Public Scrutiny. In 2023/24, the following Member training took place:

- Induction Day for new and returning Members following elections
- IT workshops
- Development Management – accredited session for those who sit on the Committee
- Licensing and Regulatory – accredited session for those who sit on the Committee
- Civic - The role of the Chairman of the Council
- Introduction Event for Newly Elected Members LGA / East of England LGA
- Governance including decision making, the Code of Conduct, and Data Protection (DP) and Freedom of Information (FOI)
- The Role of the Member
- Overview of the Help Hub, Community engagement and Member funding
- The Role of Scrutiny
- Chairing of meetings
- Audit and Accounts Training
- Local Government Finance and Budgeting
- Allocation of Housing

- Homelessness and Prevention
- A range of training on Skillsgate (our internal learning platform)

Officers

The Council has made extensive investment in training in line with its Learning and Development Strategy for staff. Staff Training is delivered in various ways including via our digital learning platform that allows staff to undertake learning remotely, at a time that is convenient for them, in person training events and via qualified train the trainers such as in our operational areas.

An extensive onboarding programme has also been developed to ensure that officers have the best possible start with the Councils and understand the culture and values of working within a local authority setting.

A management development programme has also been developed through engagement with existing managers who have helped shape the programme. The programme includes a mix of internal and externally led subject areas and includes the opportunity for aspiring managers to take part in the programme and develop future skills. Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) development is also available to teams and managers to enable officers to better understand themselves and in turn work more effectively with colleagues and teams across the Councils.

Investment has also been made in the Councils Apprenticeship and Graduate schemes ensuring that we are investing in future skills and providing a development pathway to colleagues at the early stages of their career or in the process of retraining.

Establishing Communication with all Sections of the Community and Other Stakeholders:

The Council works with the County Council, other Norfolk District Councils, the Police, NHS, Central Government departments, businesses, and voluntary and community groups.

The Council consults with members of the public through a number of avenues from workshops, telephone calls, social media channels and the website, to gauge public opinion on a number of issues such as shaping the budget, the development of the Local Plan and the Council Tax Support Scheme. The Council has established a 'Customer Panel', which is made up of residents and those who work in the districts. This Panel will provide valuable feedback on services with a view to ensure continued improvement and a first-class customer experience.

Good Governance Arrangements with Partnerships:

Partnership arrangements take the form of Service Level Agreements. These are reviewed as part of the budget setting process and in advance of the date of cessation. The Council maintains a formal protocol on how it enters into funding arrangements with voluntary and third sector organisations.

The CIPFA Framework for Corporate Governance places a high degree of emphasis on partnership working. In practice, the Council takes a collaborative approach to working, recognising that there are a variety of means to engage with third parties.

Governance of project/programme delivery

The Council has further embedded the project and programme management approach during 2023/24 via a new Project Management Office, with transformation projects and programmes now being governed through a portfolio approach. The structure beneath this is still to be finalised along with resources and capacity. Staff have been trained in project management and work within services to deliver projects.

4. Review of Effectiveness

The Role of the Council

South Norfolk Council has responsibility for conducting, at least annually, a review of the effectiveness of its governance framework including the system of internal control. The review of effectiveness is informed by the work of the Managers and Councillors within the authority who have responsibility for the development and maintenance of the governance environment, Internal Audit's annual report, and by comments made by the External Auditors and other review agencies. Full Council approve the Revenue and Capital Budget and the Treasury Management Strategy annually.

The Role of the Cabinet

The Cabinet approved the Strategic Plan and Delivery Plan and agreed a range of strategies and policies during the year, including the Treasury Management Strategy, the Medium-Term Financial Strategy and the Revenue and Capital Budget. Cabinet regularly received reports on performance, risk and financial positions. Policy development is delegated to Policy Committees with Cabinet making the final decisions.

The Role of the Finance, Resources, Audit and Governance Committee

The activity of the Committee in the financial year is described above. It has also ensured that it is satisfied that the control, governance and risk management arrangements have operated effectively. The work of the Finance, Resources, Audit and Governance Committee is summarised in an Annual Report to Council.

The Role of the Scrutiny Committee

The Scrutiny Committee can undertake any work relating to the four key principles of scrutiny as follows:

- Hold the Executive to account (Call-In of Reports before final decision)
- Performance management
- Assist policy reviews
- Internal/external scrutiny

As referred elsewhere in this report, members of the Scrutiny Committee have undergone specific training this year. The work of the Scrutiny Committee is summarised to Full Council in an Annual Report.

Role of the Monitoring Officer

The Chief of Staff is the Council's Monitoring Officer. The Monitoring Officer has the specific duty to ensure that the Council, its officers, and its Elected Councillors, maintain the highest standards of conduct in all they do. The Monitoring Officer's legal basis is found in Section 5 of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989, as amended by Schedule 5 paragraph 24 of the Local Government Act 2000. The Monitoring Officer has three main roles:

- To report on matters they believe are, or are likely to be, illegal or amount to maladministration (such a report has not been required).
- To be responsible for Matters relating to the conduct of Councillors and Officers.
- To be responsible for the operation of the Council's Constitution.

The Monitoring Officer is supported in their role by the Council's legal service, which is provided by Birketts and the Deputy Monitoring Officers.

The Role of the Chief Financial Officer

The Assistant Director Finance is designated as the Section 151 Officer for the purposes of Section 151 of the Local Government Act 1972 and is responsible under the general direction of the Cabinet for the proper administration of the Council's affairs. This statutory responsibility cannot be overridden. Responsibilities include:

- Setting and monitoring compliance with financial management standards
- Advising on the corporate financial position and on the key financial controls necessary to secure sound financial management.

Section 114 of the Local Government Finance Act 1988 requires the Section 151 Officer to report to the full Council, Cabinet and External Auditor if the authority or one of its Officers:

- Has made, or is about to make, a decision which involves incurring unlawful expenditure
- Has taken, or is about to take, an unlawful action which has resulted or would result in a loss or deficiency to the authority
- Is about to make an unlawful entry in the authority's accounts.

The Section 151 Officer has not been required to make such a report.

The Role of Internal Audit

All audits are performed in accordance with the good practice contained within the Public Sector Internal Audit Standards (PSIAS) 2013. Internal Audit report to the Finance, Resources, Audit and Governance Committee and provides an opinion on the system of internal control, which is incorporated in the Head of Internal Audit's Annual Report and Opinion 2023/24.

Internal Audit is arranged through a consortium, Eastern Internal Audit Services, which comprises Breckland, Broadland, North Norfolk, Norwich City and South Norfolk Councils, Great Yarmouth Borough Council and the Broads Authority. The Head of

Internal Audit is employed by South Norfolk Council and the operational and field management staff are employed by an external provider, TIAA Ltd.

In addition, the Head of Internal Audit role only is now provided to the Borough of Kings Lynn and West Norfolk.

The Internal Audit Service assesses itself annually to ensure conformance against the PSIAS, and are also required to have an external assessment every five years. The most recent external assessment in January 2023, concluded that the internal audit service conforms to the professional standards and the work has been performed in accordance with the International Professional Practices Framework.

The Role of External Review Bodies

Ernst and Young LLP review the Council's arrangements for:

- preparing accounts in accordance with statutory and other relevant requirements
- ensuring the proper conduct of financial affairs and monitoring their adequacy and effectiveness in practice
- managing performance to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in the use of resources

Ernst & Young LLP were appointed by Public Sector Audit Appointments (PSAA) as the Council's external auditors. The auditors give their opinion on whether the financial statements of the Council give a true and fair view of the financial position as at the year end and of the income and expenditure for the year then ended; and they also provide an opinion on the Council's arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness (Value for Money). The Council takes appropriate action where improvements need to be made.

Effectiveness of Risk Management

A risk management policy is in place and was reviewed in 2023/24 and a revised Policy was agreed by Council. The Finance, Resources, Audit and Governance Committee has oversight of the strategic risks, which are also considered by the Cabinet on a quarterly basis and committee members continued to ask challenging questions and raise issues on matters before it.

Effectiveness of Other Organisations

Governance of Companies

In 2023/24, as mentioned above, South Norfolk Council was involved in the set up of a new Joint Venture with 3 other Local Authorities – Norfolk Environmental Credits. It is critical that the Council ensures that good governance is in place from a client side (i.e. the Council) for both its wholly owned companies and the new Joint Venture and a review of governance arrangements needs to take place. This review will take place in 2024/25 against the Local Partnerships "Local Authority Company Review Guidance.

Big Sky

The Council established a group structure in 2015/16 with all companies held by Big Sky Ventures Ltd.

Big Sky Ventures Ltd is the holding company for Big Sky Developments Ltd, a property development company, and Big Sky Property Management Ltd, a property rental company, both were actively trading during 2023/2024. However Big Sky Developments Ltd has been hampered, throughout 2023/2024, in moving forward the next phase of development at its St Giles site due to Nutrient Neutrality. The purchase of Nutrient Neutrality credits from Norfolk Environmental Credits in March 2024 will now enable Big Sky Developments Ltd to restart its construction programme on site in 2024/2025.

During 2023/2024 the Council significantly increased its temporary housing stock through the purchase of additional units to service the material increase in demand. Consequently, the Council wishes to utilise the expertise within Big Sky Property Management Ltd to manage all the Council's temporary housing stock when these properties are brought into service. A review of the existing Big Sky Group structure has therefore been undertaken, informed by tax, legal and accountancy advice, which has resulted in a recommendation to full council during 2024/2025 to restructure the Big Sky Group to enable the Council to award Council contracts to Big Sky, compliant with the Procurement Act 2023.

The Council was successful in 2023/2024 in receiving a grant from the Local Authority Housing Fund to provide 40% funding towards the purchase of some of the additional temporary housing stock mentioned above but also the provision of Afghan Refugee Housing. The Council took a decision in 2023/2024 to provide the Afghan Refugee Housing through Big Sky Property Management Ltd and has therefore provided a loan to allow the Company to purchase and own, six properties for Afghan Refugees. The Council will retain tenancy nomination rights within the contractual arrangements with Big Sky on these six properties.

The effectiveness of internal controls within the companies has improved since 2022/23 following recommendations from the Peer Review and an internal audit. The Big Sky Ventures Ltd Board receive quarterly reports on the performance of the company and an annual review. The Directors of Big Sky Ventures Ltd also report annually to the Council's Finance, Resources, Audit and Governance Committee on the performance of the Group and its annual business plan for the forthcoming year. The Council's five-year capital plan, approved by Council, includes any planned new loans to the Big Sky Group and the repayment of loans as they fall due. There were no significant control weaknesses identified during the year that are required to be included in this statement.

Norfolk Environmental Credits Ltd

In March 2022 Natural England imposed constraints on the building of dwellings due to the nutrients in waterways and rivers. One of the most significantly affected areas is Norfolk where multiple Districts have been unable to grant planning permission for new homes, leading to a backlog of approximately 16,000 new homes.

A number of Norfolk Authorities agreed to the establishment of a Joint Venture, initially with Anglian Water, to provide a solution that would assist in unlocking the halt on development. Norfolk Environmental Credits was incorporated in January 2023 as a company limited by guarantee to provide a range of environmental credits, initially focusing on nutrient neutrality.

Currently Breckland, Broadland, North Norfolk and South Norfolk District Councils are Members of the Joint Venture and have each contributed £30,000 to establish the Joint Venture. Norwich City Council have also made a £30,000 contribution but have not yet become a Member and Anglian Water, who were a Member for the period May 2023 to October 2023, have contributed £150,000. In addition, Broadland District Council also provided a £150,000 loan.

Governance arrangements for the new Joint Venture were developed with the advice and assistance of Birketts. Directors of the Company are Officers from each Council, and the Board of Directors must meet a minimum of four times a year, currently this is monthly as the company gets established. A Member Group consisting of a Shareholder Representative from each member Council of the Joint Venture has also been established and meets as required to discharge matters reserved to the Members. The Company started trading nutrient neutrality credits in February 2024.

5. Governance Issues & Control Weaknesses Identified

Managers' Assurance Statements

On an annual basis, Assistant Directors (AD) across the Council complete an Assurance Statement relating to their service area, the template of which has remained consistent since 2019/20. The statements are then signed off by either the Managing Director or Director responsible for the service area.

For 2024/25, the Assurance Statements will be updated to reflect the new Code of Corporate Governance which has been adopted by Council and we will now be seeking regular updates (quarterly) from managers on areas where we are not compliant.

Assurance Statements - looking back on the issues raised in 2022/23

Procurement – Procurement was raised as an issue in 2022/23 and remains an issue, as highlighted below.

Assurance Statements for 2023/24.

The Assurance Statement asked specific questions about: policy and procedure, effectiveness of key controls, alignment of services with the Delivery Plan, human resources, finance, risks and controls, health and safety, procurement, insurance, information technology, data protection, freedom of information, business continuity, partnerships and equalities. A yes / partial / no response was required, with evidence and action needed to be noted. Each AD also needed to note any issues that they felt represented a significant control item or governance issue.

In terms of emerging themes for the organisation, the below areas have been highlighted as requiring further attention to become fully compliant. At this stage, they are not considered to be significant issues, but action will still be taken:

Procurement – A number of services have highlighted issues with the level of service being provided by Procurement, which has led to some issues with the process of awarding contracts. The AD Finance (s151) who is responsible for this service has been addressing issues with Breckland District Council, who oversee the service through the Procurement Consortium. An update on progress will be sought in the first quarter review of the assurance statements.

Documentation of major systems – Some service areas highlighted that with a move to new systems, not all work has yet been completed on ensuring teams have written procedural notes which reflect the new ways of working on the new systems. Though this is not a major issue, areas which have identified this have provided information on how they plan to become fully compliant, and an update will be provided in the mid-year review of the Assurance Statements.

Whistleblowing Policy – The policy is currently being reviewed and training is being arranged for all staff in order to become fully compliant.

Budget monitoring – Some services have highlighted partial compliance with budget monitoring, highlighting that budget managers do meet regularly with their Finance Business Partners (FBPs) to review budgets; however, some have identified issues with producing an accurate Forecast of Outturn which proves challenging with conducting accurate monitoring. Over recent months action has been taken to put the tools and training in place and increase awareness of the role of budget managers and FBPs. This will now be further embedded across the organisation.

Business continuity – Two managers highlighted that their business continuity plans require reviewing to ensure they are up to date. In addition, the IT/Digital team in particular have highlighted that they plan to introduce tabletop exercise on an annual basis in relation to disaster recovery.

Crucially, the responses have highlighted that there are no significant governance issues and governance arrangements are mainly consistent across the Council. Where partial responses have been provided, managers have already identified actions that are being progressed to address these areas and the Chief of Staff / Monitoring Officer will review progress during 2024/25, with updates being sought quarterly.

External Audit

The Council's External Auditors, Ernst and Young LLP, have not yet completed the audits for 2021/22 and 2022/23. Nationally, there is a high backlog of audit opinions for local government bodies, with only 1% of local bodies having published audited accounts on time last year. Government have outlined proposals to introduce secondary legislation to set a statutory backstop of 13 December 2024 for the publication of audited accounts for all financial years up-to-and-including 2022/23.

However, the Value for Money Interim Report presented to the Finance, Resources, Audit and Governance Committee on 22 March 2024 outlined no significant weaknesses in the arrangements of the Council in 2021/22 and 2022/23.

Internal Audit

The Head of Internal Audit has provided an overall opinion in relation to the framework of governance, risk management and controls at South Norfolk Council. For 2023/24 a reasonable assurance grading overall has been given.

As recommended by the Head of Internal Audit, the Council's annual governance statement will include details of any internal audit actions that remain outstanding from work carried out in year and any limited opinions from the year.

Limited opinions

Two limited assurance opinions were issued in draft in 2023/24 and key control weaknesses were identified as detailed below. These control weaknesses represent unresolved risks for the Council.

Key Controls and Assurance (Draft report issued 1 July 2024)

This audit focused on the key controls within housing benefits and council tax support, council tax and National Non-Domestic Rates (NNDR), Accounts Payable and the Annual Governance Statement (AGS). Ten important recommendations have been made which are currently with management for responses. These recommendations relate to raising of purchase orders and verification checks on suppliers; potential risks therefore are budget overspends due to unauthorised committed expenditure and increased risk of supplier fraud and false payments. The other recommendations relate to reconciliations between the housing benefits system and the general ledger (there are also outstanding recommendations from the BRD/SNC2307 and 2308 housing benefits and council tax reports for these as well), exemptions/discounts for council tax and NNDR, quality checks in relation to NNDR and council tax, and the completion of reconciliations between the reports from the Valuation Agency Office and the council tax system. Potential risks therefore are the impact on the integrity and accuracy of data on these systems which could lead to error or fraud not being identified and corrected and financial loss. The due dates for management action have not been agreed yet.

Accounts Receivable and Income (Draft report issued 8 July 2024)

Six important recommendations have been made which are currently with management for responses. These recommendations relate to the completion of debt recovery action, debt write off approval, raising credit notes and their approval and approval limits, and the various reconciliations that are completed for income received to the bank and other systems and their review. Potential risks therefore are the impact on the ability of the Council to receive all the income it is due and to detect errors and fraud. The due dates for management action have not been agreed yet.

Outstanding audit recommendations 2023/24

FOIs and Complaints – A reasonable assurance grading was given in this area for 2023/24. The following recommendations remain outstanding from this audit;

- Ensure that lessons learned are captured by complaints handlers in line with internal procedures, with results incorporated into the healthcheck reporting to the Corporate Leadership Team (CLT).
- Procedures relating to handling complaints over the telephone to be documented to ensure a consistent approach and that appropriate items are covered on calls in line with expectations for written correspondence.

Homelessness and Home Options - A reasonable assurance grading was given in this area for 2023/24. The following recommendations remain outstanding from this audit;

- Review how Personal Housing Plans are agreed and monitored to ensure that they are effective for the customer and the Council. Guidance governing the processing of PHPs should be formally documented and communicated to officers.
- Undertake a review of processes and responsibilities for rent collection and former tenancy debt, relating to temporary accommodation.

We also recommend that outstanding recommendations from previous years 'Limited' assurance reviews continue to be referenced in the Annual Governance Statement.

Outstanding audit recommendations 2022/23

Procurement and Contract Management

- Review of all current contracts to ensure all key documentation is located, including quotations/tenders and contracts and thereafter all records to be held centrally by South Norfolk Council and accessible by Breckland Procurement Consortium staff. Where information cannot be located, in particular contracts, copies to be obtained from the provider and filed centrally. Management to then implement controls to ensure all of the required documentation is retained, and accessible, moving forward.

Key Controls and Assurance

- Processes need to be developed to reconcile BDC income streams to the general ledger.
- The Revenues Bank Account reconciliation to the General Ledger be brought up to date as soon as possible.

Council Tax and National Non-Domestic Rates

- Management to implement controls to ensure that general ledger reconciliations are performed and checked by the appropriate members of staff within 30 days of month end.
- Management to implement a defined QA checking regime of staff work at regular intervals.

Local Council Tax Support and Housing Benefit

- Reconciliations between benefits system and GL to be reinstated. Risk: If there is no reconciliation, there is a greater risk of errors going undetected.

6. Assurance statement

The review, as detailed above, provides strong evidence of good overall assurance of the council's system of internal control and that the arrangements are fit for purpose in accordance with the governance framework.

7. Review and Approval of the Annual Governance Statement

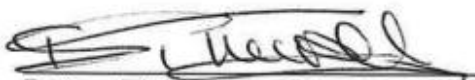
The annual review of governance is coordinated by the Chief of Staff & Monitoring Officer, involving senior managers across the Council and reviewed by the Corporate Leadership Team. This Annual Governance Statement is considered in draft by the Finance, Resources, Audit and Governance Committee and amended to reflect the Committee's considerations and the views of the external auditor. The (revised) Annual Governance Statement is published with the Council's annual accounts.

8. Certification

We are satisfied that appropriate arrangements are in place to address improvements in our review of effectiveness. Progress on these improvements and mitigation of risks will be monitored through the year and considered at our next annual review.



Trevor Holden, Managing Director



Delme Thompson, Chairman of the Finance, Resources, Audit and Governance Committee